

# Can I see the Refuge from my recliner?

by Kimo Rogala

"There's a baby moose outside our window!" proclaimed my roommate one morning. We both ran over with our cameras, ready to start shooting while letting out "Oohs" and "Aahs." It had been several weeks since calves started dropping and it seemed that everyone had seen a baby moose except me. I had spent many waking hours intensely surveying the landscape whenever I went hiking, driving, or fishing with no luck.

Yet, here was a moose calf right outside my bedroom window. "How's that for convenient wildlife!" I remarked to him. "Maybe I should just sit in front of the window on my days off and let the wildlife walk by it." If I bought a reclining chair with the cooler in the armrest, I wouldn't need to move for hours. Better yet, to improve my wildlife viewing opportunities, I could buy a big screen TV and a nature video and place them in front of the window.

I suppose that there is a bit of laziness in all of us at times. Who wouldn't want to see a brown bear on the side of a road while driving, or a pacific loon across the lake from our front porch? I myself, being originally from Southern California, am known to drive the car from one side of the mall to the other instead of walking, as would any reasonable person.

Yet, arriving on the Kenai Refuge several months ago as an intern, it struck me that Southern Californians are not alone in their habitual desire for the easiest and quickest way to do things. The Russian River Ferry strikes me the Alaskan version of driving across the parking lot. Every year thousands of people pay a fee to be shuttled across the Kenai to plunk their line ten feet from the bank in hopes of having a 3/8-inch gapped hook drift with the current into a salmon's mouth. Having partaken of this wonderful ritual, I was proudly boasting to a friend on the return ferry trip that I bagged my limit in 2 hours. Upon which I was one-upped by several long-time locals with times under an hour, proving that "quick and easy" isn't just for Southern Californians. Since then, however, a new perspective has slowly been creeping into my psyche.

When I first arrived, my impressions of the Kenai Refuge were of flat marshy and forested areas, with a bunch of lakes, a popular fishing river, and moose all

around. These are typically the things that most people see when they visit the area. Since then, I have spent several months traveling around the Refuge to survey various species of flora and fauna. In that time I have discovered that Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is a "miniature Alaska," including within its borders every major Alaskan habitat type. Viewing such a large diversity of habitats and wildlife in a relatively small area is like looking closely at a diamond and discovering its many facets, each with its own sparkle. Let me tell you about some of the "sparkles" that occur on the Refuge.

Ice fields and glaciers occur along the eastern spine of the Kenai Peninsula. They include the Harding Ice Field at 6500 feet, whose lobes form the Skilak Tustumena glaciers. Mountain goats, brown bears, ravens, ptarmigan, and iceworms inhabit this high country. Mountain tundra begins at between 1500-2000 feet and continues to the snow and rock fields of the 4000 feet peaks of the western Kenai Mountains with Dall sheep, caribou, hoary marmots, wolverine, and brown black bear.

Northern boreal forest occurs from 2000 feet down to sea level, consisting of white and black spruce, birch, aspen, and cottonwood forest in various stages of succession. This habitat is an important source of food and shelter for moose, brown black bear, lynx, wolves, coyotes, porcupines, weasels, red squirrels, and snowshoe hares. Summer migrant birds in the boreal forest include orange-crowned and myrtle warbler, olive-sided flycatcher, fox sparrow, and ruby crowned kinglet. Year-around birds that frequent the boreal forest are such species as great horned owls, hairy downy woodpeckers, spruce grouse, red-breasted nuthatches, and boreal and black-capped chickadees.

Lakes and wetlands occur throughout the northern portion of the Refuge. Hundreds of small lakes are surrounded by wetlands or spruce/hardwood forest hills. The wetland habitat supports migratory breeding birds such as common and pacific loons, grebes, trumpeter swans, and sandhill cranes, as well as moose, beaver, muskrat, and mink.

A major saltwater tideland is located at Chick-

aloon River Flats on the south side of Turnagain Arm. This tideland is the northernmost pristine saltwater wetland on the Kenai Peninsula and serves as a staging area for thousands of shorebirds and waterfowl.

Nine river drainages occur on the Refuge including the world famous Kenai River. Salmon, trout, moose, beaver, mergansers, and harlequin ducks are among the commonly seen wildlife throughout these river systems.

Two weeks ago I was working on a picturesque glacial moraine east of Tustumena Lake wondering, "Why don't they put a road out here so everyone can see the diversity that this refuge has?" Those old thoughts based on inertia and laziness had crept back into my consciousness. Then it occurred to me that I was glad there wasn't a road here cutting through the landscape. Would I rather have hundreds of people with cars and buses all around or only myself and the few intrepid souls willing to make the extra effort to

see this isolated and pristine wilderness?

Inaccessibility has benefits in rewarding only those who are willing to make the commitment to get there. Being at a site that many would like to see, but few have actually seen, is akin to an explorer's first arrival at a new land. So, next time you are driving on Sterling Highway take a look out towards the horizon and know that there is a whole undiscovered world of the Refuge available for viewing, if you are willing to get off your recliner. Even if you choose not to inspect the remote facets, know that they are out there, sparkling facets of the diamond we call Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

*Kimo Rogala is a seasonal biological intern at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He recently graduated from San Diego State University with a bachelor's degree in zoology. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*